



Culture of innovation

Enabling staff to see their ideas come to fruition can bring passion and drive to everything they do, according to Swanswell's chief executive, Debbie Bannigan. **DDN** reports

Ilanded in a culture of innovation,' says Debbie Bannigan, who this week celebrates her second year as chief executive of Swanswell. Recruited to the charity to bring her business development background to running its community-based services, she found herself planted in an environment of 'continuous endeavour and continuous improvement', which started with Swanswell's first trustees, including president Dr John Bland.

Forty-one years later Dr Bland is still on the board and has developed his vision of an organisation that will develop and do well, says Bannigan. 'It's grown, it's fulfilled all of its ambitions year on year, it has a strong balance sheet and good business relationships, and it's grown a remarkable team.'

'Arriving at Swanswell was like falling into Debbie heaven for me,' she says. 'I'd got an incredibly talented team around me that achieves awesome results. And what I've found over and over again is that they are problem-solving people. My whole team has this drive to make things different and make things better.'

While she had 'an amazing team doing amazing stuff', her early observation was that no one was really shouting about it. Swanswell workers were going to conferences and hearing presentations from bigger, higher profile organisations about issues they were struggling to resolve, knowing that they had been carrying out similar work successfully for years.

'If we were one of the seven dwarves we'd be Bashful!' she says. 'We don't tell people how good we are. But it's essential that when we know how to do something we share it with other organisations.'

So Bannigan encouraged her team to develop a model to drive ideas forward and help Swanswell take pride in innovating.

'The model is very simple,' she explains. 'We start with the idea, the stimulus. The next stage is to find out if the solution we have for it can work – whether it is practical, whether it is possible, and whether we can answer the "how to" question.'

Next comes the pilot stage, 'which usually gives us a bit of evidence about whether what we've suggested will work and have a benefit', and a research partner might then be brought in to assess the impact of the proposed new practice. Out of this thorough process will come initiatives that make it through to the marketplace, in the form of a new or enhanced service.

Having the money to underpin such ventures is of course vital, and Bannigan stresses that the trustees have carefully tended the balance sheet over the years. But they are also resourceful in investigating all opportunities for grants and funding, and have recently decided to dedicate their small but precious pot of donations from former clients and their families to an innovation fund, rather than letting them get lost in general turnover.

Announcing this to staff has already had a motivating effect. As well as making



Pride in ideas: Debbie Bannigan urges Swanswell staff to take the first step towards world-changing practice at the annual staff conference last month

it easier to grant the magical 'yes' to staff members' new ideas, it has inspired some to start raising money themselves for the innovation fund, including seven staff entering the Coventry half marathon later this month.

According to Bannigan, they've 'got the model, got the resources and got the general buzz'. So how did they connect these things for the desired effect?

'Talking to people around Swanswell I hear those ideas and that initial stimulus, and I can offer them the space, the time and the money – courtesy of our board – to explore those ideas. And I can offer them the skills, particularly around project management and partnerships to develop those ideas. When people have the space, the skill, the right partnerships and the right resourcing, they generally get on with it.'

And letting them get on with it is vital to the equation, she stresses. 'You've got to support people, but you've also got to be able to step back and let them have a go – because if I start directing things, what I lose is the special stuff, the gold dust. They know more about the problems and the issues than I could ever hope to.'

Swanswell's culture encourages ideas of every size and significance. An idea that's relatively small to resource can still make a difference in the world says Bannigan, recalling the instance of two workers, Lisa and Jade, who came to her recently to say they'd noticed that some of their female clients had an issue with self-esteem. They wanted to do a pilot with the FE college that ran courses in beauty therapy, hair care and grooming.

'They wanted a few hundred quid so I said yes, go do,' says Bannigan. 'The first group will be going through the programme about now, so we'll see whether it works and makes a difference.'

Another opportunity came up while she was talking to Swanswell's hospital liaison officer, Caroline Hammond, in the Coventry office.

'I asked her what sort of things really wound her up and she talked about a client with alcohol-related brain injury who was having problems with appropriate diagnosis and referral,' says Bannigan. A conversation with a commissioner shortly after revealed the lack of appropriate placements for people presenting with this condition, so she instigated a bid for money to research the problem further. Swanswell are now working on the problem in partnership with Warwick University.

'It was a direct response to that situation with that service user at that time – and the worker's ability to articulate that,' she says. 'We will get results from that piece of work.'

Projects at the larger end of the spectrum can be ambitious but could transform the way Swanswell reaches out to some of its clients.

'We know there are groups of people who would never walk through our doors and the concept of coming in to a "talking therapy" is so alien to them that they are never going to engage with it,' says Bannigan. 'Coming into a room and talking with a worker is never going to float their boat.'

'So how do you get through to those people? What can you offer them? Well we're

aware there's a significant amount of people who now access the world through the internet and who participate regularly in activities in a virtual environment. So why not use virtual reality to produce an alternative therapeutic environment?'

With funding from the Knowledge Transfer Partnership Scheme and a partnership with Reading University, Swanswell have begun to develop the prototype for a highly ambitious 'virtual reality' programme that will allow users to experience therapy through a computer-simulated environment.

'I don't know whether it's going to work as it's in development, but there's enough evidence to suggest it should,' says Bannigan. And whether it's a roaring success or not, the process of driving forward such initiatives adds to the determined culture of innovation.

'It's about making people realise that having a go is sometimes clunky and difficult and doesn't always work, but it doesn't matter – just have a go!' she says, emphasising that 'the start and end point is always the Swanswell team'.

'The service users are our reason for being, and that's never far from our thoughts,' she adds. 'But the strength of the team and every individual in it is what makes this organisation so very special. The end product of that is world-changing ideas – and we turn them into practice.'

Revolutionising the client experience

'We tend to believe that face-to-face is gold standard and that nothing but being in a room with someone else will work,' says Debbie Bannigan, 'But one of the important things to come out of research is the disinhibition effect of working in text. People put things in text that they wouldn't ever say to you.'

This is one of the advantages that Carly Smith and Tim Gunner found when they got involved in a project with Netmums, the UK's fastest growing online parenting organisation.

With funding from the Parent Know-How Programme, Netmums approached Swanswell for drug and alcohol-related expertise for their forum. Swanswell seized the chance to explore the possibilities of providing support services online.

Among hundreds of online topics ranging from finding shopping bargains to general health and wellbeing, the drug and alcohol threads are among the most visited. As part of a pilot project, Smith and Gunner spent time on the forum over a two-month period, providing information, reassurance and encouragement to visitors.

'One of the first things that struck me was that the drug threads were viewed more than the alcohol ones, perhaps indicating that people found it easier to ask questions about their issues from behind the cloak of anonymity that the site offers,' said Gunner.

In the eight week period their posts were looked at more than 16,000 times, Smith pointed out – 'more people than you could see in several lifetimes'.

In a context of lively debate, they see the opportunity to provide 'helpful balance' through the Swanswell posts. 'For example, in one alcohol thread all the talk was based on experience of 12-step treatment, stating that abstinence was the only real option,' explains Gunner. 'So I thought it was useful to point out that while this might be a good option, it was not the only one, and I provided some harm reduction advice.'

To fully engage with the other posters on the site, they had to learn the forum's own particular language and jargon – not just abbreviations such as IMHO (in my humble opinion) and LOL (laughing out loud) but Netmums' specialised abbreviations, where BF could mean 'breastfeeding' instead of 'boyfriend', as on other sites. 'I admit my first reaction was more WTF!' admitted Gunner 'but I soon started to get the hang of it.'

There are, they say, downsides to working in an online environment, such as the time-consuming process of reading back over threads that might go back over months, before making a comment. But the upside of that is that very little is missed, as everything is documented. Both Smith and Gunner also acknowledged that some of the intensely personal stories can make it difficult

to 'switch off' when you have 24-hour access to your clients and the possible temptation to view updates and developments from home.

Smith and Gunner's enthusiastic report on the trial strongly recommends continuing and building on the work with Netmums. They have ambitious plans for developing their work and improving the interactive experience between themselves and site members.

'The online world provides an opportunity to reach a vast amount of people who may never come in contact with drug and alcohol services,' said Gunner.

'With 65 per cent of homes having internet access and 80 per cent of people online accessing social networking sites, the opportunity to reach out to this amount of people is too good to miss.'

Netmums is at www.netmums.co.uk. Swanswell will be providing an online clinic during Alcohol Awareness week, 19-23 October, at www.netmums.com/support/Swanswell_expert_answers_your_questions.3606/

Learning in partnership: Carly Smith and Tim Gunner explain to Swanswell colleagues how they are reaching hidden clients through the Netmums project

